

EIGHTY DAYS

NELLIE BLY AND ELIZABETH BISLAND'S
History-Making Race Around the World



"What a story!
What an extraordinary
historical adventure!"
—AMANDA FOREMAN,
author of *A World on Fire*

MATTHEW GOODMAN

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Elizabeth Bisland's
HISTORY-MAKING RACE
AROUND THE WORLD



*MATTHEW
GOODMAN*

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PROLOGUE

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Hoboken, New Jersey

SHE WAS A YOUNG WOMAN IN A PLAID COAT AND CAP, NEITHER TALL nor short, dark nor fair, not quite pretty enough to turn a head: the sort of woman who could, if necessary, lose herself in a crowd. Even in the chill early-morning hours, the deck of the ferry from New York to Hoboken was packed tight with passengers. The Hudson River—or the North River, as it was still called then, the name a vestige of the Dutch era—was as busy as any of the city’s avenues, and the ferry carefully navigated its way through the water traffic, past the brightly painted canal boats and the workaday tugs, the flat-bottomed steam barges full of Pennsylvania coal, three-masted schooners with holds laden with tobacco and indigo and bananas and cotton, hides from Argentina and tea from Japan, with everything, it seemed, that the world had to offer. The young woman struggled to contain her nervousness as the ferry drew ever closer to the warehouses and depots of Hoboken, where the Hamburg-American steamship *Augusta Victoria* already waited in her berth. Seagulls circled above the shoreline, sizing up the larger ships they would follow across the sea. In the distance, the massed stone spires of New York rose like cliffs from the water.

For much of the fall of 1889 New York had endured a near-constant rain, endless days of low skies and meager gray light. It was the sort of weather, people said, good only for the blues and the rheumatism; one of the papers had recently suggested that if the rain kept up, the city would be compelled to establish a steamboat service up Broadway. This morning, though, had broken cold but fair, surely a favorable omen for anyone about to go to sea. The prospect of an ocean crossing was always an excit-

ing one, but bad weather meant rough sailing, and also brought with it the disquieting awareness of danger. Icebergs broke off from Greenland glaciers and drifted dumbly around the North Atlantic, immense craft sailing without warning lights or whistles and never swerving to avoid a collision; hurricanes appeared out of nowhere; fires could break out from any of a hundred causes. Some ships simply disappeared, like Marley's ghost, into a fog, never to be heard from again. The *Augusta Victoria* herself was lauded in the press as "practically unsinkable"—the sort of carefully measured accolade that might well have alarmed even as it meant to reassure. A twin-screw steamer of the most modern design, only six months earlier the *Augusta Victoria* had broken the record for the fastest maiden voyage, crossing the Atlantic from Southampton to New York in just seven days, twelve hours, and thirty minutes. Arriving in New York, she was greeted by a crowd of more than thirty thousand ("The Germans," *The New York Times* took care to note, "largely predominated"), who swarmed aboard to get a closer look at the floating palace, taking in her chandeliers and silk tapestries, the grand piano in the music room, the lavender-tinted ladies' room, the men's smoking room swathed in green morocco. Transatlantic travel had come a very long way in the half century since Charles Dickens sailed to America, when he eyed the narrow dimensions and melancholy appointments of his ship's main saloon and compared it to a gigantic hearse with windows.

Dockside, the minutes before the departure of an oceangoing liner always had something of a carnival air. Most of the men were dressed in dark topcoats and silk hats; the women wore outfits made complicated by bustles and ruching. On the edges of the crowd, peddlers hawked goods that passengers might have neglected to pack; sweating, bare-armed stevedores performed their ballet of hoisting and loading around the ropes and barrels that cluttered the pier. The rumble of carts on cobblestones blended with a general hubbub of conversation, the sound, like thunder, seeming to come at once from everywhere and nowhere. Somewhere inside the milling crowd stood the young woman in the plaid coat. She had been born Elizabeth Jane Cochran—as an adolescent she would add an *e* to the end of her surname, the silent extra letter providing, she must have felt, a pleasing note of sophistication—though she was known to her family and her old friends not as Elizabeth or as Jane but as "Pink." To many of New York's newspaper readers, and shortly to those of much of the world, her name was Nellie Bly.

For two years Nellie Bly had been a reporter for *The World* of New York, which under the leadership of its publisher, Joseph Pulitzer, had become the largest and most influential newspaper of its time. No female reporter before her had ever seemed quite so audacious, so willing to risk personal safety in pursuit of a story. In her first exposé for *The World*, Bly had gone undercover (using the name “Nellie Brown,” a pseudonym to cloak another pseudonym), feigning insanity so that she might report firsthand on the mistreatment of the female patients of the Blackwell’s Island Insane Asylum. Bly worked for pennies alongside other young women in a paper box factory, applied for employment as a servant, and sought treatment in a medical dispensary for the poor, where she narrowly escaped having her tonsils removed. Nearly every week the second section of the Sunday *World* brought the paper’s readers a new adventure. Bly trained with the boxing champion John L. Sullivan; she performed, with cheerfulness but not much success, as a chorus girl at the Academy of Music (forgetting the cue to exit, she momentarily found herself all alone onstage). She visited with a remarkable deaf, dumb, and blind nine-year-old girl in Boston by the name of Helen Keller. Once, to expose the workings of New York’s white slave trade, she even bought a baby. Her articles were by turns lighthearted and scolding and indignant, some meant to edify and some merely to entertain, but all were shot through with Bly’s unmistakable passion for a good story and her uncanny ability to capture the public’s imagination, the sheer force of her personality demanding that attention be paid to the plight of the unfortunate, and, not incidentally, to herself.

Now, on the morning of November 14, 1889, she was undertaking the most sensational adventure of all: an attempt to set the record for the fastest trip around the world. Sixteen years earlier, in his popular novel, Jules Verne had imagined that such a trip could be accomplished in eighty days; Nellie Bly hoped to do it in seventy-five.

Though she had first proposed the idea a year earlier, *The World*’s editors, who initially resisted the notion of a young woman traveling unchaperoned, had only just consented to it. The previous three days had been a blur of activity, mapping out an itinerary, visiting ticket offices, assembling a wardrobe, writing farewell letters to friends, packing and unpacking and packing again. Bly had decided that she would take but a single bag, a small leather gripsack into which she would pack everything, from clothing to writing implements to toilet articles, that she

might require for her journey; being able to carry her own bag would help prevent any delays that might arise from the interference or incompetence of porters and customs officials. As her traveling dress she had selected a snugly fitted two-piece garment of dark blue broadcloth trimmed with camel's hair. For warmth she was taking a long black-and-white plaid Scotch ulster coat, with twin rows of buttons running down the front, that covered her from neck to ankles; and rather than the hat and veil worn by most of the fashionable oceangoing women of the time, she would wear a jaunty wool ghillie cap—the English-style “fore-and-aft” cap later worn by Sherlock Holmes in the movies—that for the past three years had accompanied her on many of her adventures. The blue dress, the plaid ulster, the ghillie cap: to outward appearances it was not an especially remarkable outfit, but before long it would become the most famous one in all the world.

On the morning of November 14, Nellie Bly had awoken very early—she always hated to get up in the morning—turned over a few times, dozed off again, and then woke with a start, wondering anxiously if she had missed her ship. Quickly she made her bath and got dressed. (There was no need for her to spend any time applying makeup, as only women of abominably low morals, or unimpeachably high social standing, dared paint their faces.) She tried to choke down some breakfast, but the earliness of the hour, and her anxiety, made eating impossible. The hardest thing of all was saying goodbye to her mother. “Don’t worry,” Bly told her, “only think of me as having a vacation and the most enjoyable time of my life.” Then she gathered up her coat and her gripsack and made a blind rush down the stairs before she could too deeply regret the journey that was only just beginning.

Their apartment was on West Thirty-fifth Street, near Broadway; at Ninth Avenue, Bly paid her nickel and boarded a downtown streetcar. The car was dirty and poorly ventilated, and the straw spread on the floor smelled of the recent rains. The street was choked with horse traffic; on the tracks overhead an El train screeched past. It was only seventy-five days, Bly kept reminding herself, and then she would be back home again. She got off at the corner of Christopher Street and Greenwich Avenue, at the edge of a maritime district, where the low, irregular buildings grew up like toadstools along the water’s edge: rigging warehouses and sail lofts, junk shops with their mysterious curios brought in from all over the world, the grim boardinghouses and brutal-looking taverns of

the sailors. At the Christopher Street depot she caught the ferry—she needed only a one-way ticket, three cents—that carried her across the Hudson River to the pier at the foot of Third Street in Hoboken, New Jersey. There she was met by two agents of the Hamburg-American Packet Company; they well understood how important it was to the company that Nellie Bly be delivered on time. The two men accompanied their new passenger aboard the *Augusta Victoria* and presented her to the ship's captain, Adolph Albers, explaining to him the special purpose of her trip. An especially popular commander, Albers had a full beard and a genial manner that inspired confidence. He assured Bly that he would do everything in his power to see that the initial part of her complex journey was a complete success. He was certain, he said, that he could put her ashore in Southampton the following Thursday evening; she could then get a good night's sleep in one of the city's hotels and be up in time to catch one of the trains that ran each morning from Southampton to London.

"I won't take any sleep until I am in London," replied Nellie Bly, "and have made sure of my place in the bakers' dozen who go from Victoria Station on Friday night."

Her voice rang with the lilt of the hill towns of western Pennsylvania; there was an unusual rising inflection at the ends of her sentences, the vestige of an Elizabethan dialect that had still been spoken in the hills when she was a girl. She had piercing gray eyes, though sometimes they were called green, or blue-green, or hazel. Her nose was broad at its base and delicately upturned at the end—the papers liked to refer to it as a "retroussé" nose—and it was the only feature about which she was at all self-conscious. She had brown hair that she wore in bangs across her forehead. Most of those who knew her considered her pretty, although this was a subject that in the coming months would be hotly debated in the press.

Before long some friends and colleagues came aboard to bid her goodbye and Godspeed. The theatrical agent Henry C. Jarrett presented her with a bouquet of flowers and a novel; reading, he advised, was the best preventive of seasickness and ennui. Julius Chambers, *The World's* managing editor, was there as well, and had brought along with him a timekeeper from the New York Athletic Club. As the city's leading amateur sports club, the New York Athletic Club often provided timekeepers for bicycle races, swimming races, and events of track and field; this

was the first recorded instance of the club's providing a timekeeper for a race around the world.

Nellie Bly had made her career by training herself to remain calm in difficult situations, and now, too, she managed not to betray the nervousness that she felt; the next day's issue of *The World* would pronounce that she had demonstrated "not a wince of fear or trepidation, and no youngster just let loose from school could have been more merry and light-hearted." While they waited, Bly asked one of her colleagues from *The World*, "What do you think of my dress?" Her tone seemed cheerful enough, but when he hesitated she demanded of him, "Well, a penny for your thoughts."

The reporter eyed the dark blue gown with the camel-hair trim, beneath the checked overcoat; he noted aloud that she was planning to sail past Egypt, and if one of Joseph's descendants there didn't take that dress for his coat of many colors, then—but he was interrupted before he could complete the thought. "Oh, you spiteful thing," Bly said dismissively, with a theatrical toss of her head. "I take back my penny offer for such an opinion as that."

Though *The World* chose not to see it, her impatience was surely indicative of the complicated mix of emotions she was feeling: the intense desire to get going at last, regret at leaving behind friends and family, excitement and anxiety about the strangeness of everything she was about to encounter—strange countries, strange foods, strange languages (for Nellie Bly was attempting to navigate the world speaking only English). This day had dawned bright and beautiful, but she could not help but wonder about the seventy-four yet to come, and the twenty-eight thousand miles that lay ahead of her. If all went well, she would be spending her Christmas in Hong Kong, and her New Year's somewhere in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

On the front page of that morning's *World*, a map stretching across five columns of type showed "The Lines of Travel to be Followed by *The World's* Flying Representative." The line began in New York, extended across the Atlantic Ocean to England, moved down through Europe to the Mediterranean, continued south through the Suez Canal to the Arabian Sea along the northeast coast of Africa, then shifted eastward past Ceylon and up to Hong Kong and Japan, crossed the Pacific Ocean to San Francisco, and concluded through the northern part of the United States back to New York. It all looked very well thought out, but her itinerary,



Nellie Bly in her famous traveling outfit

Bly knew, was not nearly as firm as that solid black line made it seem. It was not clear, for instance, whether the mail train from London to Brindisi, Italy (about which she had been so insistent to Captain Albers), actually left every Friday night or not. A more irregular train schedule could mean a missed connection with the steamship leaving from Brindisi, and from there the delays would cascade, leading inexorably to the collapse of her trip. She understood that she was setting out at the worst time of year, when the Atlantic storms were at their fiercest and snow often blockaded train tracks across the American West. Moreover, she would be racing not just through space but also, in a sense, through time: during the seventy-five days of her trip she would experience the weather of all four seasons. It was a commonplace of world travelers' tales that extreme change in temperature provided the perfect breeding ground for illness. Fever lay in wait everywhere; there was gripe in Europe, malaria in Asia. Storms, shipwreck, sickness, mechanical breakdown, even just a slackening of pace by an uncooperative railroad conductor or ship's captain: any one, by itself, could prove fatal to her plans.

She couldn't bear the thought of returning home a failure; later on she would tell the chief engineer of one of her ships, in full seriousness, that she would rather die than arrive late in New York. She hadn't built her career, hadn't made it from Pennsylvania coal country to the headlines of New York's largest newspaper, by losing. What Nellie Bly did not know, though, as she set out on her journey (and indeed would not know for many weeks to come), was that she might well lose her race, not to the calendar or to Jules Verne's fictitious traveler Phileas Fogg, but to a very real competitor. For, as it turned out, there was not just one young female journalist setting out from New York that day to race around the world—there were two.

ON THE MORNING of November 14, as Nellie Bly made her way to the Hoboken docks, a man named John Brisben Walker was on a ferry headed in the opposite direction, bound from Jersey City to Cortlandt Street in lower Manhattan. Walker was the wealthy publisher of a high-toned monthly magazine called *The Cosmopolitan* (in later years it would be purchased by Joseph Pulitzer's rival William Randolph Hearst and subsequently assume a very different character), and as the ferry crossed the

river he read *The World's* front-page article revealing Nellie Bly's plan to race around the world. Instantly he recognized the publicity value of such a scheme, even as it occurred to him that a world traveler might do better by heading west rather than east as Bly was planning to do. At once an idea suggested itself: *The Cosmopolitan* would sponsor its own competitor in the around-the-world race, traveling in the opposite direction. Of course, *The Cosmopolitan's* circumnavigator would have to be, like Bly, a young woman—there was a pleasing symmetry to the notion, and in any case a man racing against a woman would never win anyone's sympathy—and she would have to leave immediately, if she was to have any chance at all of returning to New York before Nellie Bly. After a quick conference at the office with his business manager, John Brisben Walker sent him off to a travel agency to prepare an itinerary, and at half past ten he sent a message to Elizabeth Bisland's apartment, only a few blocks away in Murray Hill. It was urgent, he indicated; she should come to the office at once.

Elizabeth Bisland was twenty-eight years old, and after nearly a decade of freelance writing she had recently obtained a job as literary editor of *The Cosmopolitan*, for which she wrote a monthly review of recently published books entitled "In the Library." Born into a Louisiana plantation family ruined by the Civil War and its aftermath, at the age of twenty she had moved to New Orleans and then, a few years later, to New York, where she contributed to a variety of magazines and was regularly referred to as the most beautiful woman in metropolitan journalism. Bisland was tall, with an elegant, almost imperious bearing that accentuated her height; she had large dark eyes and luminous pale skin and spoke in a low, gentle voice. She reveled in gracious hospitality and smart conversation, both of which were regularly on display in the literary salon that she hosted in the little apartment she shared with her sister on Fourth Avenue, where members of New York's creative set, writers and painters and actors, gathered to discuss the artistic issues of the day. Bisland's particular combination of beauty, charm, and erudition seems to have been nothing short of bewitching. One of her admirers, the writer Lafcadio Hearn, whom she had befriended in New Orleans, called her "a sort of goddess" and likened her conversation to hashish, leaving him disoriented for hours afterward. Another said, about talking with her, that he felt as if he were playing with "a beautiful dangerous leopard," which he loved for not biting him.

Bisland herself was well aware that feminine beauty was useful but fleeting (“After the period of sex-attraction has passed,” she once wrote, “women have no power in America”), and she took pride in the fact that she had arrived in New York with only fifty dollars in her pocket, and that the thousands of dollars now in her bank account had come by virtue of her own pen. Capable of working for eighteen hours at a stretch, she wrote book reviews, essays, feature articles, and poetry in the classical vein. She was a believer, more than anything else, in the joys of literature, which she had first experienced as a girl in ancient volumes of Shakespeare and Cervantes that she found in the library of her family’s plantation house. (She taught herself French while she churned butter, so that she might read Rousseau’s *Confessions* in the original—a book, as it turned out, that she hated.) She cared nothing for fame, and indeed found the prospect of it distasteful. So when she arrived shortly after eleven at the offices of *The Cosmopolitan* and John Brisben Walker proposed that she race Nellie Bly around the world, Elizabeth Bisland initially told him no. She had guests coming for tea the next day, she explained, and besides, she had nothing to wear for such a long journey; but the real reason, she later admitted, was that she immediately recognized the notoriety that such a race would bring, “and to this notoriety I most earnestly objected.” However, Walker (who by this time had already made and lost more than one fortune) was not a man who was easily dissuaded, and at last she relented.

At six o’clock that evening, Elizabeth Bisland was on a New York Central Railroad train bound for Chicago. She was eight and a half hours behind Nellie Bly.

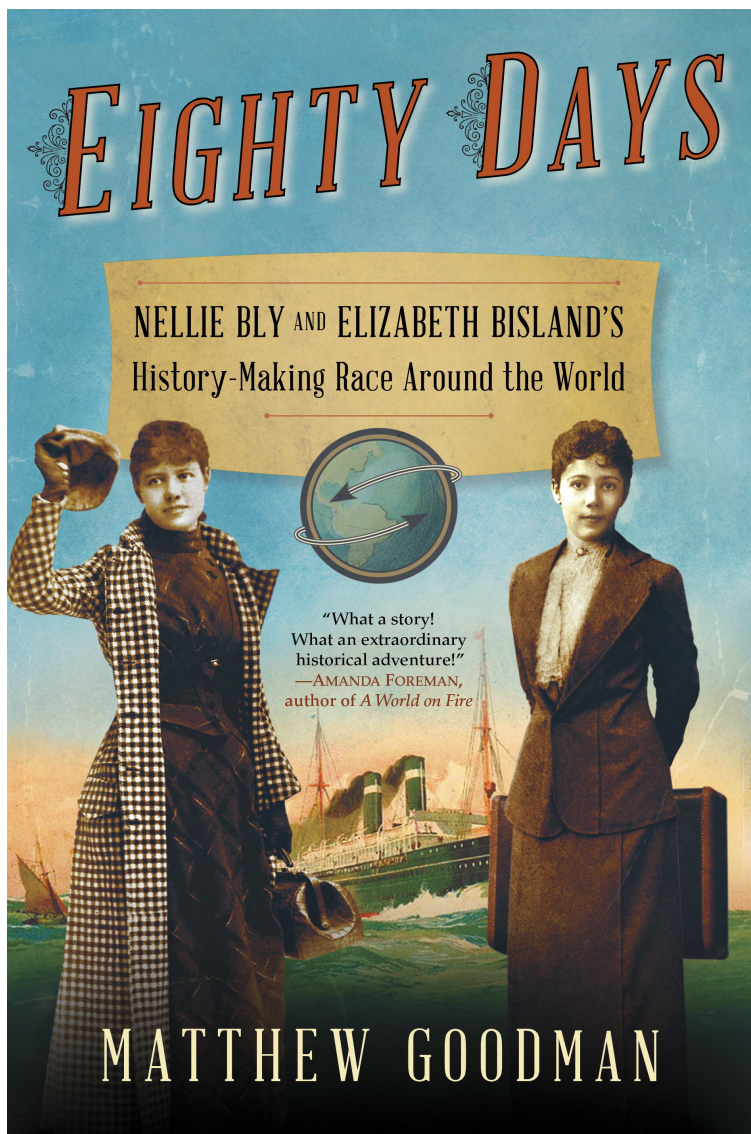
ON THE SURFACE THE TWO WOMEN, Nellie Bly and Elizabeth Bisland, were about as different as could be: one woman a Northerner, the other from the South; one a scrappy, hard-driving crusader, the other priding herself on her gentility; one seeking out the most sensational of news stories, the other preferring novels and poetry and disdaining much newspaper writing as “a wild, crooked, shrieking hodge-podge,” a “caricature of life.” Elizabeth Bisland hosted tea parties; Nellie Bly was known to frequent O’Rourke’s saloon on the Bowery. But each of them was acutely conscious of the unequal position of women in America. Each had grown up without much money and had come to New York to make

a place for herself in big-city journalism, achieving a hard-won success in what was still, unquestionably, a man's world. More than anything else, of course, the two women were to be linked forever by unique shared experience: partners, in a sense, in a vast project that for months would captivate the United States, and much of the world besides.

Bly and Bisland raced around the globe on the most powerful and modern forms of transportation yet created, the oceangoing steamship and the steam railroad, sending back messages to waiting editors by means of telegraph lines that had—in the expression of the period—annihilated space and time. They sailed across the breadth of the British Empire, from England in the west to Hong Kong in the east, their ships carrying the tea and cotton and opium and other valuable goods that helped sustain the imperial economy. They traveled through a world defined by custom and deformed by class, in every country they visited, and even on the ships and trains they used to get there.

Nellie Bly and Elizabeth Bisland were not only racing around the world; they were also racing through the very heart of the Victorian age.

THE AUGUSTA VICTORIA WAS SCHEDULED to depart at nine-thirty in the morning; shortly before that a long blast from a horn sounded, warning all who were not to sail that it was time to go ashore. "Keep up your courage," one of Nellie Bly's friends said, giving her hand a farewell clasp. Bly did her best to smile, so that her friends' last recollections of her would be cheering ones. Her head felt suddenly dizzy, and her heart, she would say later, felt as if it were about to burst. Her friends moved slowly away, joining the line of other well-dressed people making their way down the gangplank. From the railing of the ship she could see for miles; out toward the horizon the water turned imperceptibly from blue to gray. The world seemed to have lost its roundness, become a long distance with no end. The moment of departure was at hand. Solemnly Nellie Bly and the man from the New York Athletic Club synchronized their watches.



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